

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: John 10:11-18

[Jesus said:] ¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

SERMON by Pastor Zach Johnson

What is left to say about Jesus the Good Shepherd? The gospel text this morning seems pretty self-explanatory. Over the centuries it has been made clear that we, the body of Christ, are the sheep, and Jesus has laid down his life for us by willingly going to the cross. The hired hands are the false leaders and prophets who pretend to care about the flock but are really only interested in money and power. They quickly abandon the flock when faced with the fear and terror of a threatening force. Finally, the wolves are a metaphor for evil and sin, which can indeed scatter us when they attack.

The only thing that has changed is that Jesus the Good Shepherd is risen from the dead. Because of this, Jesus is the eternal Good Shepherd who watches over us, fending off the wolves of evil and sin when they attack and finding us when we are scattered or lost from the Good Shepherd. While the Good Shepherd watches over us, we are freed from the valley of the shadow of death and from the fear of evil. Therefore, we are free to enjoy the peace and tranquility of green pastures and still waters.

So, what else is there to say? Like I said, Jesus is the eternal Good Shepherd who is able to protect us, the flock, for all of eternity.



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

Well, since the Holy Spirit is alive and active, there is always something more that we can glean from this gospel text. Jesus clearly points out that his flock is incomplete: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one Shepherd.” Even though the Good Shepherd had died for the sake of the entire world, there are many sheep still scattered, still lost.

To best understand who these scattered sheep are, we must remember that the tenth chapter in John’s gospel is Jesus’ discourse linked to his healing of the man born blind in the previous chapter. The man born blind was an outcast of society. Because of his disability, this man was reduced to sitting and begging others for food and money. It wasn’t until Jesus opened his eyes that the rest of society began to take notice of him.

The wolves of indifference and passivity, the wolves of discrimination and dislike, and the wolves of fear of the unknown are very cunning. They easily scatter us with their sharp fangs of mistrust that convinces us that we should dislike anyone who looks and acts differently from us. These wolves are the cause of racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination. Unfortunately, these wolves are alive and well within the greater Church.

It is no secret that the ELCA as a whole denomination is the whitest denomination in the entire country. Now, while there is nothing wrong with being white, the truth is that God created humans to be quite diverse, and that diversity is something to be celebrated. The diversity that God created in humanity is a gift that enriches our lives as it brings with it new perspectives, new ideas, and new ways of understanding each other and the world we live in. I especially appreciate human diversity for the food. Life would be a lot duller without Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Indian, Greek, Italian, German, and Middle Eastern food to tantalize our taste buds.

Now, because Jesus the Good Shepherd abides in us and we abide in him, part of the new life we share with Jesus Christ has made us into good shepherds. Because of this, we, like Jesus, need to ask ourselves who are the sheep that are missing from the flock? And, we, like Jesus, are tasked with going out and finding these lost sheep in order to invite them into abiding relationship with the Good Shepherd so that we truly become one flock.

The good news for us is that Jesus goes out in front of us to lead us to those sheep who are unaccounted for. But we must understand that Jesus will lead us to those whom society has dismissed as unworthy, outcasts, and unlovable, like the man born blind. Jesus’ healing of the man born blind is a reminder to us that those whom society considers unworthy and unlovable are loved by Jesus. This is also a good reminder that when we, ourselves, feel unworthy and unlovable, we too are loved by Jesus. Jesus is our Good Shepherd and cares for us enough to lay down his life for us.



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

One organization within our wider church is Lutheran Social Services of America with our own local branch Lutheran Social Services of Southern California. Lutheran Social Services of Southern California is the embodiment of what it means to love and care for the unworthy and outcasts of society. The work they do is of vital importance. They help the vulnerable become safer and stronger, the dependent self-sustaining, the isolated become part of the community, and give the weary hope.

Lutheran Social Services of Southern California offer emergency services that include food pantries and hot meals, clothing, emergency vouchers for hotel, bus, gas and utilities, housing and rental referrals, eviction prevention and prescription assistance, holiday, school or hygiene packs, humanitarian response during times of natural or man-made disasters and other short-term assistance programs. They also provide over 50 specialized programs, offering resources to people in need. These programs range from aging and disabled supportive services, resources for veterans, transitional and permanent affordable housing, job training and financial literacy, behavioral health services, youth mentoring and academic success, refugee and immigrant services, family services of all types, disaster preparedness and response, and many others. And they do all of this regardless of a person's or family's race, orientation, or even denomination.

It is traditional within the ELCA to highlight Lutheran Social Services on the fourth Sunday of Easter, which is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday. We do this because Lutheran Social Services of Southern California definitely serves as good shepherds to many of the vulnerable and outcast of society. One way that Jesus leads us to be good shepherds in the world is to give our support to this amazing ministry through generous giving of our financial resources as well as our time to help volunteer for these amazing programs. They are an extension of our own ministry, and many in our wider community would be neglected if it weren't for them.

There are, of course, other ways that Jesus the Good Shepherd leads us to find those that are not currently in the flock. Our own Saturday food pantry is another way for us to find and care for the vulnerable in our society. But, in addition, as long as we open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts, Jesus will lead us to others to invite into the flock. And no matter how far we might need to travel, no matter the terrain we will cover, no matter what unknown dangers may lurk on our path, Jesus the Good Shepherd will be in front leading us and keeping us safe so that the wolves of evil and death won't be able to scatter or destroy us. And, if we happen to become lost from the flock ourselves, for whatever reason, Jesus the Good Shepherd will stop at nothing to find us and bring us back, for we are forever his beloved.

Amen.

